

Albatross: their world, their ways

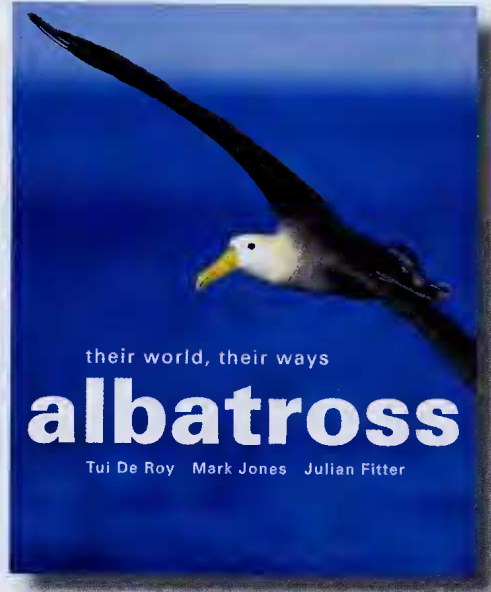
Tui De Roy, Mark Jones and Julian Fitter

Publisher: CSIRO Publishing, 2008. Large format, hardback 232 pages.
ISBN 9780643095557 RRP: \$79.95

This is a beautifully presented, larger format, hardcover book, something that is both a pleasure to browse and read. The bulk of the photographs are by Tui de Roy and these are superb; albatross with sunsets and albatross in panoramas that capture the spirit of the wild breeding grounds are some of my favourites.

Albatross is divided into three sections. The first, by de Roy, details each species or species group as a photographic essay. The combination of images and text provides insights into de Roy's experiences whilst visiting remote island breeding grounds. Although there is a bias towards New Zealand sites, this is not inappropriate given 11 forms of albatross breed there. Parochial Australians may, however, be disappointed with the treatment of the only form to breed in close proximity to this continent: a single paragraph with no accompanying photographs indicates de Roy did not connect with the Shy Albatross *Thalasache cauta* (*cauta*) at one of Albatross Island, The Mewstone or Bebra Branca.

The second section deals with science and conservation. Here, many of the world's leading albatross researchers and conservators have contributed short essays that capture lifetimes of experience. While some have been instrumental in directly reducing the slaughter of albatross through unacceptable fishing practices, others have contributed to knowledge of at sea ecology, breeding systems, flight energetics and so on. These are interesting essays; the more so for their diversity and the origins of the contributors. Take for example Conrad J. Glass; a police inspector, conservation officer and direct descendant of founders two centuries prior on Tristan da Cunha, the world's remotest inhabited island. His contribution is an elegant summary of the impact of man since the discovery of this volcanic outpost in 1506, and the generational changes that have ultimately seen a once staple food source now fully protected. Who knew that the Sooty Albatross was a legal component of the menu until 1986?



Australian contributions also feature here. Rosemary Gales, a Tasmanian based researcher, provides a concise summary of the global conservation status of albatross. It is sobering to cast an eye over population trends for the 22 recognised species of this text. Based on repeated counts at the breeding grounds, 12 remain in decline despite a reduction in the slaughter by fishing industries. The fact that half of the world's albatross populations are going backwards must surely be alarming! The populations for just five species are thought to be stable, though four of these remain threatened, and for a further four species, there remain gaps in knowledge that prevent any accurate assessment. It is therefore ironic that the Short-tailed Albatross is the only species whose population is now increasing. Hunted to 'certain extinction' for its plumes, a handful of pairs were re-discovered on an active volcano off Japan in the 1950s. With intensive management, the population has crept upwards to number some

400 pairs today. Such a remarkable resurrection provides hope for other albatross forms whose more recent declines have been precipitous.

The final section is devoted to species accounts. This is the ready reference section of the book, a place for readers to dip into for an identification feature, to brush up on the threats faced by a particular species or to check a distribution map.

Most of my criticisms relate to what's not included rather than problems with what is. For example, while the images that are included are first-rate, they are almost entirely from breeding grounds; albatross on land; feeding chicks; displaying or flying over nesting sites. As a consequence, the images fail to capture the true essence of the albatross – these are creatures of the open ocean 'that expend 95% of their existence at sea' (p. 21). A greater emphasis on photographs of birds at sea, hanging effortlessly in the wind beside a pitching ship, soaring over huge swells or skimming the millpond of a strangely calm ocean would have addressed

this. Similarly, because of the bias to the breeding grounds, an entire age-cohort, the far-ranging juvenile and immature birds – of all species – is missing. Beware the birder that spies an albatross from a headland or partakes in what is one of the great wildlife experiences, an organised pelagic excursion. A goodly proportion of the albatross encountered, and those that often pose the greatest challenge to identification, are simply not represented pictorially (and receive scant and largely inadequate treatment in the text). Even with a ready reference section, this is not a field guide nor a book that one takes to sea. Rather, it seems most appropriate that it be read by a warm fire, when 'miserable' weather and howling winds keep one indoors.

Books of this nature are rarely going to do everything, and so, despite these gaps, this remains both a beautiful and informative work. As a 'pelagic tragic' it readily finds a place on my bookshelf and I would thoroughly recommend it to others both as a beautiful gift and a worthy addition to one's library.

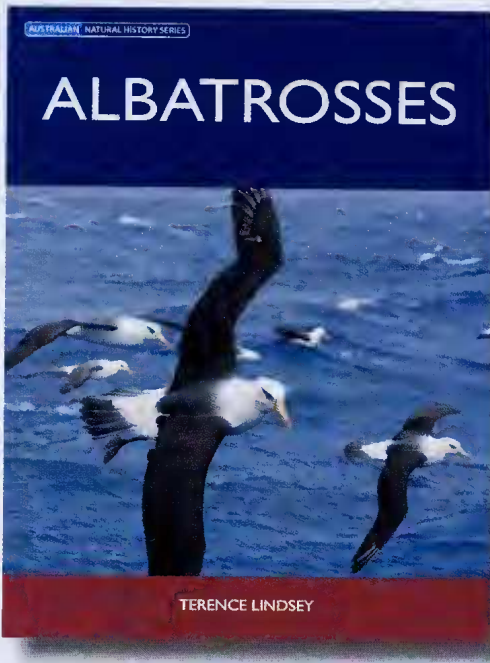
Albatrosses

Terence Lindsey

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ISBN 9780643094215. RRP: \$39.95

Albatrosses is the latest addition to the Australian Natural History Series to be produced by CSIRO Publishing. Like others in the series, it aims to present a comprehensive and up-to-date account of a faunal group in 'a style suitable for upper secondary or undergraduate level readers, as well as (field) naturalists'. At first glance, this book didn't grab me. It has a nice enough cover, and contains 18 colour photographs along with a smaller number of black and white images, sketches and tables, but with page after page of text, and few sub-headings, it isn't a book that one can readily dip into. This will surely make it harder to sell to the general reader and especially the target audience. Don't be put off though, because one must digest this book chapter by chapter to appreciate it. Indeed, once started, I found that it was both interesting and engaging, and not being particularly long, with 112 pages of text and images, I read it in an afternoon.

Albatross are truly remarkable birds and the eight chapters of this book ensure these ocean wanderers are more readily accessible. The somewhat loosely titled first chapter, 'Myth and Legend' is more about setting the scene and enticing the reader with some of the more remarkable aspects of albatross ecology than about the tales and beliefs of seafarers of yesteryear. Regardless, it's a worthy start. This is followed by a chapter outlining the four albatross groups, namely, the great albatross, northern pacific albatross, southern mollymawks and sooties. An introduction for beginners, it contains a blend of descriptive features and ecological characteristics that separate one group from another. This is not a field guide section and never pretends to be; rather, it serves to introduce the reader to the key groups before delving further into albatross ecology. Chapters on the 'Southern Ocean', 'Food and foraging', and 'Flight' combine to provide insights into both



how and why these birds routinely move over such vast distances. Several further chapters deal with 'Courtship' and the remarkably long 'Nesting cycle'. Approaching the final chapter, the reader has an appreciation of the complexities of albatross life history; notably, the degree to which specialisation leaves these birds so

exposed to environmental change. With the scene set, this last chapter deals with 'Human impacts'; well written, it can be summed up in single word – depressing.

Lindsey has done a very good job of condensing what is known of albatross (based on thousands of pages of research writings) into a readable format. One aspect I particularly like is his readiness to identify the grey areas and remaining gaps in knowledge, as for albatross there remain many. It was here as a nitpicking reviewer that I was hamstrung at most turns. For example, the text states that 'Wanderer's are the biggest albatross. Nothing else comes close' and I immediately thought 'ahaa, I've seen evidence that suggests Southern Royals take that prize', but reading on, Lindsey writes 'except another albatross. The fact is the two great albatrosses, the wanderer and the royal, are so closely matched in size...'

All in all, this is a book that should be well received by field naturalists. Lindsey's style ensures that the results of quite complex science, based on decades of study, has been condensed into a very readable text.

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One Hundred and One Years Ago

A NIGHT WITH THE BIRDS OF LAWRENCE ROCKS

BY A.H.E. MATTINGLEY, C.M.Z.S.

The Dove-like Prion is vernacularly known at Portland as the "Snow-bird." There were very few of their rat-like burrows in this small area of soil, which was riddled in every direction with Penguin and Mutton-bird holes, and as the Dove-like Prion is a fragile bird, and unable to fight either the Mutton-bird or Penguin for its choice of a nesting site, it has perforce to utilize that portion of the rookery unoccupied by these last-named birds, which is the outer edge of the soil where it meets the rock. As the soil, especially at these parts, is loose and friable, the hurricanes that at times come ragipg over this exposed sislet tear away the edges of the rookery and destroy these unfortunate birds. Evidences of the destructive work of wind and water were plainly visible. All along the extreme edge of the rookery were burrows of the Dove-like Prions, from which the covering of soil had been swept away by the wind, whilst in the nesting cavity at the extremity many broken and a few unbroken eggs were found, one egg comprising a clutch, whilst some of the adult birds had been blocked in their burrows and had been smothered. Most of the burrows of these birds had a turn in them, instead of being excavated straight into the soil. This turn was no doubt made by the birds mainly to prevent the complete choking up of their burrows by particles of wind-driven soil, but in some cases the turn in the tunnelling was due to a hard piece of rock intruding and barring the way, rendering it necessary to turn off in another direction.

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